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By Congressman Mike Quigley (IL-05)

These days in Washington, we hear a lot about our porous borders. Border security is fundamental to national security; it's true. But while there's been an excess of hand-wringing about breaches on the southern side of the U.S.-Mexico border, there's been precious little conversation about the public safety threat originating on the northern side.

The Mexican drug cartels are killing people at a staggering rate – more than 30,000 since 2006. Some may shrug their shoulders and conclude this is just another problem beyond our reach. That would be a mistake.

The drug cartels are getting their guns from the United States. Since 2006, the ATF has seized more than 10,000 firearms and nearly one million rounds of ammunition destined for Mexico, where the public is not allowed to purchase or possess guns.

In September 2010, a report from Mayors Against Illegal Guns revealed that 90 percent of the firearms recovered and traced in drug cartel-related crimes in Mexico originated in the United States; this report also noted that southwest border states were the source for 75 percent of these firearms.

Furthermore, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) has testified before Congress that the Mexican drug cartels' weapons of choice include AR-15s, AK-47s, and other high-capacity "long guns," and that these weapons are overwhelmingly traced to U.S. sources.

The drug cartel's violent war for control, which is fueled by illegal trafficking from the U.S. to Mexico, seriously impacts our public safety.

But at the hour when we are most in need of pragmatic leadership to address this difficult challenge, ideological politics have instead ruled the day.

The ATF recently proposed new policy which would require firearms retailers in southwest border states to report multiple sales of long guns—a significant step that will give ATF key information for investigating and cracking down on illegal gun traffickers, particularly along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Unfortunately, before that proposed rule even had the opportunity to receive full vetting through the public comment process, a rider was added to the House-passed CR last month which would prohibit any funds from being used to implement this common-sense rule.

The ATF's proposal is not about gun control or compiling a registry of long gun owners. Rather, this is a law enforcement response to the evidence from successful tracings of weapons recovered in Mexico.

Recent tracings show that a large number of these weapons were first sold by a licensed gun dealer in California, Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas. This rider would undermine law enforcement's capacity to combat illegal gun trafficking and put Americans at even greater risk of gun violence.

The attempt to blunt the ATF's capacity to enact and enforce sound policy does not end there.

Congress has withheld the resources ATF needs to execute its charge. During the last eight years, the ATF's budget grew at a much slower pace than the budgets of all of the other federal law enforcement agencies.

Lack of funding undermines the agency's core functions, including inspecting federally licensed gun dealers to detect public safety violations, and analyzing crime gun trace data to solve gun murders and trafficking crimes.

In 2009, the ATF inspected only about 10 percent of federal firearms licensees—meaning dealers will be inspected on average once every 10 years. This is woefully short of ATF's very modest goal of inspecting every gun dealer every three years.

Finally, for the past four and a half years the ATF has operated without a director. With no leadership at the helm, the agency is simply incapable of fully enforcing existing federal law. The vacancy at the ATF for this absurd length of time is not for want of qualified nominees, but primarily because the Senate has failed to act.

During those 1,700 days, more than 50,000 Americans have been murdered by firearms, the vast majority of which came at the hands of killers who never could have legally purchased a gun.

We must do everything we can to secure the border, strengthen our anti-gun-trafficking efforts, and help the Mexican government fight the drug cartels. But to achieve that goal, we will need to untie the hands of the ATF and allow it to discharge the very responsibilities with which Congress has entrusted it.